



World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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United Nations Committee on Information

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PUBLIC INFORMATION

Gerhard HAENSEL, Secretary of the United Nations Committee on Information, reviews UN efforts in the dissemination of information. Mr. Haensel believes that UN information programmes should continue to focus on poor countries with limited access to modern information technology, and that UN printed material should continue to be distributed in third world countries through non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and individuals. Despite the financial crisis, which is adversely affecting United Nations information activities, the Department of Public Information has introduced advanced information technologies, such as a UN Home Page on the World Wide Web of the Internet which offers comprehensive information about the Organization and its work. According to Mr. Haensel, UN Information Centres are an important link between the Organization and other parts of the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few years, the world has witnessed rapid developments in the field of communications. But despite all the advances in modern technology, the information gap between rich and poor nations continues to widen. Today, hundreds of millions of people in many parts of the world still depend on traditional channels of information and communications. Can the international community establish a new, more just and more effective world information and communications order?

Our guest today, Gerhard Haensel, is Secretary of the United Nations Committee on Information. Joining me to talk with Mr. Haensel are Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia. Mr. Haensel, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Mr. Secretary, I just read what it says on the teleprompter, but I wonder how high the priority is in the developing countries for the kind of technology that we're accustomed to using and seeing developed all the time in the so-called "first world". Do they all want to trade in their typewriters for computers and word processors? Or perhaps do they have other priorities that they could spend their money on?

HAENSEL: Well, there are quite a number of, may I say, even more pressing priorities, but public information and communication are essential parts of society's life support system. And particularly in a world of tremendous technological advances, particularly in the field of communication, it is absolutely necessary that these countries are not marginalized, that they are also in a position to participate more and more on an equal basis in international information flows. And this requires, of course, equipment, this requires training, this requires first and foremost access to new forms of communication.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Haensel, that's all very well, but surely one of the main problems is the low rate of literacy in many countries. I mean, it's all very well to talk about introducing high technology, but if the illiteracy level in a country is over 50 per cent, as it is in many countries, some probably closer to 90 per cent, is it reasonable to expect that this new technology could be effectively introduced?

HAENSEL: Well, I think it is reasonable, and the United Nations and United Nations programmes and specialized agencies have to strive for that and are striving for that. There is not so much done, let us say, in practical terms by the United Nations Secretariat itself, but together with UNDP, with UNESCO —

LITTLEJOHNS: The UN Development Programme.

HAENSEL: — the UN Development Programme and others, the Department is active in this particular field. I just would like to refer to the regional seminars which have been held over the last five years in order to strengthen and to promote pluralistic and independent media in these countries — this is one thing. On the other hand, the General Assembly last year adopted a resolution on communication and development, and this matter was also very much highlighted during the most recent session of the Committee on Information, because there is no development without communication, and there is no communication without development.

STEELE: You're in something of a jam here, aren't you? You have a tremendous opportunity to cut costs by going on-line with your services; you have a tremendous volume of paper that is very costly to ship; and yet you have consumers in the developing countries without the technology to pick it up — let the literacy question quite aside. Who's responsible for providing the hardware-software at the other end? Is that the UN's business, to be concerned about providing equipment to developing countries?

LITTLEJOHNS: Which is very costly.

HAENSEL: It is a very costly thing, and certainly particularly under the present circumstances the UN cannot do what it certainly wanted to do, or even, as you might say, what it should do. Expectations among developing countries' speakers are high in this regard. On the other hand, as you mentioned, going on-line and using electronic means of dissemination, the session also made it very clear that information and hard copy — be it print, radio tape, videotape — will still for a long time be the prime media in developing countries. So we have to be very careful and have to balance the output, if I may use this expression, of the Department for Public Information's production.

STEELE: What percentage of the hard copy goes to the developing world at the present time? You had, in 1994, something like 1.3 million copies of publications of one kind or another coming out of DPI, and then in '95 it almost trebled to something on the order of 4.4 million copies of publications and other documents. Obviously some of that was to do with the fiftieth anniversary, but it's a tremendous volume. How has that shifted, and where does it go? Who gets it?

HAENSEL: Much of it was related to the UN fiftieth, and most of it was shipped upon request to what we consider target audiences, special groups, in preparation and for the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary, so this might not be a realistic figure. But I would think that most of the print material, maybe about 40 per cent, goes to special groups in the developing world, most of them media and non-governmental organizations. There's a tremendous increase in the utilization of our material by educational institutions.

DEEN: Mr. Haensel, you mentioned about on-line, providing on-line databases and computerization. But a number of developing countries at this last session complained that some of their countries even don't have telephone facilities. In fact, there was one delegate who said that it takes about 10 years in his country to get a telephone and another two years to get a dial tone on the telephone. So how do you plan to computerize and go on-line in developing countries when they don't even have the basic facilities?

HAENSEL: We have to be very careful in this. You are absolutely right. On the other hand, you see, there is no field in technological advances where it goes as fast as in communications. And the guiding principle for, let us say, getting the message of the United Nations across is to address partners with a multiplier effect, people and institutions who re-disseminate information, who use our material as a kind even of raw material, because we will be hardly ever in a position to, let us say, meet each and every information request on an individual basis. And this is particularly true with regard to the information needs in the developing world.

DEEN: And you mentioned about getting the message across; well, the complaint is that the UN has failed to get the message across, and that's why there's so much criticism of the UN. Do you think this criticism is right?

HAENSEL: Well, you see, the Committee on Information has met this year I think at the most challenging period in the history of the United Nations. There is a strengthened role of the Organization in major fields — social and economic development, peace-keeping, peace-building, humanitarian assistance, the strengthening of democratic values — but at the same time, all this has, of course, led to an increase in interest in the United Nations. But at the same time we are faced with an enormous budgetary crisis, and the task which we have — and this was the major object of deliberations in the Committee on Information — is how can the Department for Public Information, as the information arm of the whole Organization, as the focal point for information activities within the Secretariat, pool its expertise, pool its resources in order to communicate a strong message of the United Nations and inform about the relevance and the work of the United Nations after its fiftieth anniversary.

STEELE: What are the main cuts being felt in terms of public information? What areas have suffered? You're in radio, you're in television, you're in print, publications, you're on-line now: which areas have suffered most in terms of cuts?

HAENSEL: I would say that, as the budget of the Organization and the budget of the Department are established, it is not so much a particular area. Because, as you know, most of the budget costs are staff costs — this is a very high portion — and so it goes across

the board. We feel particularly well cuts in areas of publications. It is very important, we are mandated to maintain the linguistic balance of publications —

STEELE: So you have six languages you have to publish?

HAENSEL: And not any more might everything be able to be done in the six languages.

STEELE: How do you manage that in television and in radio, for example? How do you —

HAENSEL: Well, you see, in television and radio it is actually not yet so much the problem. Or let us put it another way. There are radio productions in languages other than the six official languages, and these radio productions provide the Department and the United Nations with the biggest exposure. Think, for instance, that radio productions in Hindi and Portuguese alone are aired on a regular basis by 164 stations — this is tremendous. This is more than in some of the so-called official languages. What the Department, under its management, is doing now is to establish partnerships with media organizations. So recently an agreement was concluded with a broadcasting organization in Brazil, and this is very important not only to reach audiences in Brazil but also in the Portuguese-speaking African countries. So these are more the forms and methods which the Department is using in order to address the budgetary problem. And this is what we understand when we say doing more with less.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Gerhard Haensel, Secretary of the United Nations Committee on Information. Mr. Haensel, I'd like to follow up a bit on that question of radio and TV. The programmes that you are issuing, are they newscasts? As you know, here in the United States more people get their news from radio and television, particularly television, than from newspapers. Are you broadcasting news programmes, or are they sort of featurish programmes, rah-rah for the United Nations, this is what we're doing? Or are they actually providing spot coverage, so to speak, of UN events?

HAENSEL: There is a strong emphasis now on news and documentary, serious, and this is something which is extremely in demand. Let us go to —

LITTLEJOHNS: Not too serious, I hope, otherwise you're going to turn your audience off! [LAUGH]

HAENSEL: No. But, you see, let's go back to television. The UN in Action video series is a news series which is actually reaching, every week, according to an internal study which the Department carried out, is seen by 160 million people. And 48 per cent of those who air the programme, they do it in news prime time, news prime time. And this is something which speaks for this kind of production. Because one of the big challenges the

Department is facing is that, while we do our work in a situation where information about the United Nations is very much in demand, the interest is at a very high level, we do this in a very, let us say, saturated information and communication environment. Our production and our outputs have to be meet high quality standards so that they stand out in the crowded field and are not only noticed but are part of international information flows.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Haensel, I may mention here that this programme, *World Chronicle*, is also seen very widely. And I hope that your Information Committee is aware of the contribution that the *World Chronicle* makes to your programmes.

HAENSEL: Certainly.

DEEN: Mr. Haensel, much of your promotional work in the field is done by the 78 UN Information Centres, which are strongly supported by the developing countries. Why do Western States want to downsize or eliminate these Centres? I believe there was a resolution at your last meeting.

HAENSEL: I wouldn't say that the Western countries would like or are interested in downsizing Information Centres, because, you know, the Information Centres are a vital link to the Organization's audiences. In the field the Information Centres — of course, they are not information agencies, they do not compete with other media, but they provide the media with essential material and they play an important, an enormous role in promoting knowledge about the UN and support for the United Nations. The question is only that this has to be done in a very efficient way. And a number of Centres have set milestone examples during the UN fiftieth and in connection with the preparation of major UN conferences. They reached out, I wouldn't say for the first time, but in a remarkable way to the academic community, to students, to NGOs, particularly in the developing world. And this is something which has proved the importance of Information Centres' work. This was also underscored during the deliberations of the Committee. And maybe the resolution you are referring to is actually asking for a further strengthening of the United Nations Information Centres.

DEEN: Right. There was a resolution calling for an assessment of Information Centres.

HAENSEL: In order to strengthen them.

LITTLEJOHNS: Calling for what, Thalif?

DEEN: An assessment of how they have been faring, and, you know....

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned reaching out to educators and students.

HAENSEL: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Isn't that a job for UNESCO rather than UN DPI?

HAENSEL: I wouldn't say that, because the students, the young generation is the generation of the decision-makers, the policy-makers, and of those who carry the world on their shoulders for tomorrow. And DPI's activities also at headquarters have been marked over the last one or two years in particular by a stronger emphasis on the younger generation.

STEELE: What is the UN's annual budget for information? What is the DPI budget? How much is spent each year?

HAENSEL: The DPI budget is approximately 200 — no, it's — just a second — the DPI budget is now \$138 million —

LITTLEJOHNS: Per year?

HAENSEL: For two years.

DEEN: Biennium, yes.

HAENSEL: For two years.

LITTLEJOHNS: So about \$70 million a year.

HAENSEL: Actually, compared to the overall budget of the Organization, it is a declining budget. It has certainly been increased over the last couple of biennia, but actually, as compared to the overall budget, it has decreased, and the Assistant Secretary-General for the Department of Public Information has, for the first time last year, submitted a zero growth budget for the Department. And this is, I think, a remarkable thing to do.

STEELE: How many staff are employed by DPI producing publications, radio, television, in total? Is it a large staff?

HAENSEL: It is not a large staff. I wouldn't say so. It is actually, I believe, considering the work this staff performs, and if you compare it with media organizations, a very, very small staff.

STEELE: The Internet and the on-line computer services I'd like to come back to for a moment. You mentioned a breakdown of roughly 40 per cent of your hard copy going to the developing world, so if we leave a balance of 60 per cent, there's a large margin in there for electronic media to replace hard copy. And I take it you're exploring that actively, the on-line, the Internet, the Web pages, throughout the UN system.

HAENSEL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, this is a major field of DPI's activities, particularly over the last year. The Department is in the process of consolidating the UN home page on the Worldwide Web. You might recall that first attempts have been made in connection with the commemoration in San Francisco the middle of last year, but now we have a daily presence on the Web, not only by material which was published by DPI, but also important documents and important material originating from other departments and offices within the system. This is very important, and, as you know, those who cruise the Internet in many

cases are also, we've found, among the younger generation, and this is exactly our audience. This is the reason why we pay a lot of attention also to electronic dissemination. On top of that, certainly the Internet is, where available, immediately available.

STEELE: Do we have a sense of what the pick-up is, so far?

HAENSEL: Yes, we have a sense. It is estimated that we have approximately 30,000 retrievals per day. It is remarkable also that the retrieval rate is very high at the beginning of the week. This shows that institutions — among them the media and non-governmental organizations — that they access very much.

DEEN: Do you have these databases in the field as well, or only in New York? On-line databases?

HAENSEL: It is also in the field. It is, where it's available —

DEEN: In UN Information Centres?

HAENSEL: Yes. Yes. Not all the Information Centres are so well equipped, I must say, but more and more Information Centres are also now starting electronic dissemination of material. This is very important.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Haensel, the UN agencies — UNICEF, UNESCO, the Population Fund, World Food Programme, etc., etc. — have their own information divisions, some more effective than others. How do you coordinate your activities with them? Without overlapping.

HAENSEL: The coordination of this kind of — yes, this is a very important issue, and I'm glad you raised the question. You know of the traditional existence of the Joint United Nations Information Committee. This is a committee which meets once a year —

LITTLEJOHNS: This is an internal committee.

HAENSEL: It's an internal committee composed of the heads of the information divisions of the respective agencies and programmes of the United Nations system. And over the last two years the work of this Committee has become more focused, more oriented to practical issues of common concern, common interest, such as the information work during the cycle of major conferences; the participation of the United Nations and the United Nations system in international exhibitions, fairs; the production of information material by pooling resources, pooling expertise, available in the various offices and divisions. So this is a very laudable thing which the Joint United Nations Information Committee has achieved over the last years, and this continues, and this is the major channel of doing just what you refer to as avoiding duplication.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Haensel, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle.

Our guest has been Gerhard Haensel, Secretary of the United Nations Committee on Information. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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